

## **HR Research Excellence Award 4 year Review Report– September 2014**

### **Process for internal evaluation**

Approval, internal evaluation and monitoring of the action plans for the Award is undertaken by the University Research Committee, a main committee of the University, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor Research, Professor Martin Griffin. Research Committee membership comprises both academic and research staff from each School, and the committee reports to Senate, the supreme academic authority of the University. Where appropriate, items are referred to Council, Aston's governing body. An Early Career Researchers Committee (a sub-committee of Research Committee) has been involved in evaluation and monitoring since its establishment early in 2014. Operational responsibility for development and implementation of the action plans resides with an Associate Director in Human Resources. At key review stages (year 2 and year 4 reviews) plans are discussed, amended and approved through Research Committee, but additionally disseminated for comment and feedback to the Deans, ECR Committee, all research staff (currently 131), all Associate Directors HR and HR Advisors, and the Director of HR.

Throughout the last four years continuous evaluation and monitoring ensured that the action plans produced in 2009/10 and 2012 did not remain static. When considering action plans its biannual meetings, Research Committee reviewed any available data that informed the understanding of whether the action was being/had been achieved, e.g. course attendance data, mentoring uptake, data from the Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey (PIRLS) and the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS). Therefore, not only was progress on existing actions monitored during the period covered by each plan, but actions were added when new ideas or evidence came to light, e.g. after survey results were known, demonstrating Aston's commitment to ongoing improvement for researcher development.

### **Key achievements and progress over the four-year period**

#### **Principle 1: Recognition of the importance of recruiting, selecting and retaining researchers**

- Role profiles for researchers are now used consistently during the recruitment stage, and a specific role profile is now available for Knowledge Transfer Associates. Short profiles for grading research posts at the application stage are now in place.
- The HR Advisor Business Partnership model in the Schools has been very effective in providing support to both Principal Investigators and Researchers and, in particular, this has contributed to significant improvement in practice when recruiting research staff, and in managing staff as they come towards the end of their contracts.
- Recruitment & Selection training was made a requirement for Chairs of all Panels recruiting research staff.
- Specific sections were included in the Quick Reference Guide for Managers on recruiting and supporting research staff
- Feedback from both the PIRLS and CROS surveys indicated that recruitment and selection are positively viewed by both groups of staff.

## **Principle 2: Researchers are recognised and valued by the University as an essential part of our human resource**

When initial mapping against the Concordat was undertaken in 2009 the activities defined under this Principle were already well addressed because of existing policy and practice, and this remains the case. The University participated in PIRLS (Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey) for the first time during 2013. The survey results illustrated the confidence that these senior managers have in supporting the career development of the research staff they manage, and the importance they placed on this activity. 'Creating opportunities and nurturing researchers' careers' was the 2<sup>nd</sup> place activity cited for being an effective researcher leader. The survey indicated Aston does particularly well compared to a benchmark group of universities in terms of their very positive responses to being recognised and valued by Aston for the contribution they make. Aston's PIRLS have more confidence in managing staff performance and in leading people than the benchmark group. Since 2010 research staff have been eligible for performance-related pay (PRP), and, for example, in 2012 proportionately more research staff received PRP than the institution average.

## **Principle 3: Researchers are equipped and supported to be adaptable and flexible in the global research environment**

- The University's Careers Service now gives careers advice to research staff, the only staff group to whom this applies.
- All research staff on fixed-term appointments now attend a contract review meeting a minimum of 3 months before expiry of their contract. This meeting, with an HR Advisor, discusses the potential for redeployment within the University and looks at career skills.
- In December 2012 a short-life working group was established by the Research Committee to develop the detail of a new Early Career Research (ECR) Development Programme. The group was chaired by an ECR, and the majority of the membership were ECRs.
- The ECR Development programme was launched in December 2013.
- The short-life working group was established as an Early Career Research (ECR) Committee in January 2014 with an ongoing remit to advise the Research Committee on researcher development, and to promote activities with the total ECR group (research staff and new lecturers, some 192 in total at present). The Committee, which receives support funding via the offices of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research, has had direct involvement in development of the ECR Development programme, flyers and handbooks for new ECRs, and the staging of the first ECR event (September 2014).

## **Principle 4: Recognition of the importance of researchers' personal and career development at all stages of their career**

- Performance Development Review paperwork was amended to remove any ambiguity that research staff should have appraisals. The revised Performance Related Pay (PRP) framework introduced in 2010 applies to all staff.
- The School of Life and Health Sciences provides an excellent model of good practice in supporting researchers, which via the ECR Committee is now being propagated into other Schools. A postdoctoral society has been given funds to support their career development, and the School also hosts a "social" event postdoctoral staff where there is more career support input and encouragement to apply for fellowships, ideally to stay with the School. The School is continuing to support an externally funded Dorothy Hodgkin fellow beyond the end of the funding,

and also provides continuation funding for two ARCHA research fellows.

- A cross-institutional mentoring scheme is now in place; research staff are invited to participate. Mentoring with the departmental context is a feature of the ECR Development Programme and is currently being phased in.
- The recently introduced ECR development programme contains a requirement to complete a development plan with their mentor. (Note: In the 2013 CROS survey, 68% of research staff agreed that they had a clear career development plan, against a benchmark group of 52%). Aston is currently trialling the Researcher Development Planner supplied through Vitae.
- A two-day development and networking event for ECRs is planned and imminent (late September 2014), and it will fit into a series of planned annual events.

**Principle 5: Individual researchers share the responsibility for and need to pro-actively engage in their own personal and career development**

- 51% of research staff participated in the CROS 2013 survey, against a benchmark pre-92 university group score of 28%, demonstrating an interest in, and awareness of, the importance of their own careers.
- A researcher development website has been established (<http://www.aston.ac.uk/research/support/ecr-development/>) to raise awareness of the opportunities available, emphasising the need for their engagement.
- A Facebook group has recently been developed to provide ECRs with a forum for informal discussion and support.
- In August 2014, monthly targeted emails to research staff were introduced to remind them of the opportunities available and encourage their participation in development activities.

**Principle 6: Diversity and equality must be promoted in all aspects of the recruitment and career management of researchers**

- The Athena Swan Bronze Award was achieved by the University in 2010 and by the School of Life and Health Science in 2013. The Silver Award was achieved by the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences in June 2014.
- Analysis of statistical data related on recruitment, retention and progression of research staff, is now in place, and considered through the Equality & Diversity Committee. More detailed analysis of data was undertaken for the two Schools involved in the Athena Swann submissions (who between them have 89% of the research staff) and a plan of action to address the 'leaky pipeline' has been put in place.
- In the institution's globally benchmarked Great Place to Work Survey, conducted in January 2013, there were very high levels of satisfaction from research staff (>83%) with all aspects of their treatment for a number of protected characteristics e.g. gender, ethnicity. (This level of satisfaction was also seen in the CROS survey in June 2013). 71% of research staff said Aston was a great place to work (against Aston average of 66%).

**Principle 7: The sector and all stakeholders will undertake regular and collective review of their progress in strengthening the attractiveness and sustainability of research careers in the UK**

- After a very low response rate in the sector-wide CROS survey of 2009, in January 2010 the University was able to get a 28% response rate (above the national average for the May 09 survey) for an identical internal survey. The CROS survey response in 2013 was 51% (national average 27%).
- Monitoring and evaluation reports to Research Committee each time it meets (biannually).
- The Associate Director HR and others in Staff & Graduate Development, the

Careers Service, and the PVC Research attend Vitae conferences and workshops to understand sector-wide issues and to share best practice.

- The Associate Director HR is a member of Vitae's Midland Hub Advisory Group

### **Summary of actions**

The Action Plans for 2009 and 2012 have been updated over time, and completed actions noted. Significant and positive progress has been made on those areas where we had identified opportunities for improvement; of the 44 actions detailed in the action plans, 33 have been completed in full; and all outstanding actions have been rolled forward into the new plan.

### **Strategy for the next four years**

Since October 2009 Aston University has had in place an Action Plan for implementation of the Concordat, and we were in the first tranche of institutions to receive the HR Research Excellence Award in September 2010. Feedback from both the CROS and PIRLS surveys in 2013 confirmed Aston's has a positive approach to the development of research staff. The success of our initiatives demonstrate that senior managers have a greater understanding of their responsibilities with respect to the management of researchers, and the research staff themselves are more engaged with their own career development.

This review suggests that there are no major areas of development, and many areas of strength, but we are committed to continued improvement. All the essential requirements for the provision of an outstanding researcher development experience are in place, backed up with effective and enabling policies. Whilst we are confident that we can continue to improve what we offer and develop new ways of engaging research staff, our data indicates that we already have a highly satisfied group of staff, so demonstrable impact for them has to be one focus for our strategy going forward. The existing research staff, and their success stories are a key resource, and the newly formed ECR Committee is going to be central to our work, so we will develop a number of case studies of researcher profiles.

There will be the continued use of the CROS and PIRLS survey in 2015 and 2017 to provide us with the benchmark data that we need to continue to evidence our progress. Closer working with other groups e.g. the Equality & Diversity Committee and the Research Support Office, are important in gaining collective understanding across Aston of key issues and challenges, and ensuring coherent delivery of development activities. Other areas that will be addressed are research staff induction, increasing research staff participation in development events, and improving awareness of external development activities. Actions detailed in our plans will be incorporated into mainstream HR Strategy and Research Strategy to ensure visibility, and will align with Aston 2020, our institutional strategy, which gives very clear research ambitions to be achieved within a high performance culture.

The writing of a coherent, specific, researcher development strategy is essential, and although we have discussed this before, it has not yet been realised.

To drive all of this work forward a new permanent 0.8FTE Researcher Developer post based in Staff & Graduate Development will be recruited in December 2014.

The success criteria for our work on researcher development over the next four years are defined in the associated action plan of work. In summary, success will see research staff who are even more engaged and active in their own career development, supported by managers and mentors who fully understand the needs of research staff, working in an environment where they can progress and thrive.

September 2014

Approved by Chair's Action, Research Committee.  
(Full Committee ratification at next meeting)